

A professional portrait of Ben Heraghty, a man with dark hair and a slight smile, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

325 CONSULTING INTERVIEW SERIES

WITH

BEN HERAGHTY

VP Strategy &
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INTERVIEWED BY DOMINIC MOORE

BIOGRAPHY

Ben is Vice President of Strategy & Planning, Asia Pacific for Brambles Ltd. Brambles is a global container pooling and logistics company with the operating brands of CHEP (the blue pallets you see everywhere), IFCO (crates that carry fruit & veges from farmer to store) and a variety of other re-usable containers in Automotive manufacturing, Aerospace, Oil & Gas and Industrial/FMCG manufacturing. Prior to Brambles he was a Senior Manager in the Qantas corporate strategy team, and worked as the GM of Strategy and Supply Chain in a private equity owned print & logistics company. His management consulting experience was with AT Kearney in Australia and Asia. He was also trained and worked in the law, but he now describes himself as a “recovering” lawyer.

CAREER RELATED QUESTIONS

What is the best thing about your job?

The global nature of the role is both the best and the worst thing. The global scope provides you with lots of opportunities and great experience on strategic planning, M&A and projects. Even though it is ASX Top 20, Brambles is unusual in that less than 10% of revenue is in ANZ, and ~60% is in the US and UK, so the job involves a lot of travel. Luckily a large portion of my work is in Asia, so the flying there is more manageable, but there is also a fair bit of work in the northern hemisphere, which is tough when you have two young kids. I also like the Brambles culture – it’s very down to earth and the vast majority of people are just good people. I’m also lucky to have excellent corporate strategy peers in EMEA and The Americas.

What is the most challenging project/problem you have worked on either as an external consultant or an internal strategist?

Transformation work can be really grinding, which is why it so often fails. I was at Qantas during some of the tougher years (including the grounding of the fleet) and some of the transformation work was very challenging. But as demonstrated now, it was absolutely necessary to get the company to a better place for everyone – customers, employees and shareholders.

What advice would you give someone transitioning from a consulting firm to a role in industry?

Consulting is generally about developing good working relationships in a short amount of time. With industry colleagues, there is a longer term relationship that needs to be developed, with a longer lead time to establish credibility, so tread softly at first and listen well.

Also in consulting, we think more PPT is better because it is the only evidence we have that proves we're doing lots of "value adding work" for our very high fees. At some level this is correct, because clients want us to do the hard data-crunching yards, show the rigour of our insights and build a compelling story. It's also usually hard to argue against data-based insights. However, in industry, less PPT is always better. Take time to listen and develop rapport and dialogue on the key issues, before peppering people with PPT, or drowning them in chevrons and Harvey balls. Conversation and understanding of the key strategic issues gives you far more credibility and insight than pumping out copious amounts of PPT. Unless it's a commissioned piece of consulting work, generally more than 10 slides now gives me a headache. [Editor's note: remind me to send this to Ben's direct reports]

Who has influenced your career the most and why?

I've had some great mentors over the years at AT Kearney, GEON Group, Qantas and now Brambles. They know who they are. They're invaluable to steer you in the right direction and act as a sounding board to clarify what you generally know is the right thing to do, but sometimes need a little shove in the right direction.

What is the favourite piece of advice you have received and from whom?

"Most people come to work with good intentions." I try to remind myself of this tendency towards empathy when there is conflict or disagreement. It helps me try to see the other point of view and dig deeper into what is going on. I never get it right 100% of the time (and often forget), but at least it helps me get to a better understanding of where people are coming from. Note the use of "most people", not "all people"!

I also received some very practical advice early in my consulting career about communication. I think it might have been a friend at BCG who said "don't make your audience work hard to understand your slide. The message should be immediately obvious." This is something I drill into my teams, especially internal strategy teams. Simplicity and crispness takes more work, not less.

PERSONAL INSIGHTS

As a child what did you want to be when you were older

I always wanted to be a politician. However, at this time I have to say “no comment”. Please speak to my press secretary.

What are your three favourite books and what are you currently reading?

Unfortunately I’m a bit out of the loop on the great literature of our time, so I have defaulted to my Top 3 films:

- The Big Lebowski
- The Godfather
- The Empire Strikes Back

If I’m reading books, it’s generally to my kids. With my eldest I’ve graduated to Roald Dahl, and with my youngest we’re investing heavily in ‘Cars and Trucks and Things That Go’.

To demonstrate that I do indeed have a vaguely cultural side, I have had ‘Love In The Time Of Cholera’ sitting on my bedside table for months now. Hopefully, I’ll get to it this Christmas...

Who is your personal or business hero/heroine and what quality do you most admire in them?

I wouldn’t say that I have a hero/heroine. But there are certainly qualities I admire in some people. Top of mind at the moment are the perseverance of Aung San Suu Kyi, the poise of Barack Obama, and the courage of Michelle Payne (first female jockey to win the Melbourne Cup).

Who would you like sitting next to you at a dinner party and why?

Any of the following:

- Barack Obama, because he’s cool and awesome.
- Ewan McGregor, because he seems to be a decent guy and is a great actor
- Ellen DeGeneres, because she’s so entertaining
- Robin Williams (if he was still alive), because he was so funny
- My wife, because she’s great, and I should spend more time with her [Editor’s note: remind me to send this to Ben’s wife]

What is your favourite quote or motto?

“Less is more”